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AUTHOR Freeley, Theresa J.; Brady, Sheri A.
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ABSTRACT

Noting that child advocates are increasingly implementing monitoring projects to track the status of former welfare families and are using the findings to inform their agendas, policymakers, and the general public, this issue brief introduces monitoring strategies and suggests issues for consideration in designing a monitoring project. Monitoring, defined as tracking a family's income, composition, and other social and economic indicators, is useful for illustrating trends and highlighting what is happening to children and families. The brief highlights issues that should be considered in developing a monitoring project: (1) envisioning the final product; (2) choosing a focus; (3) identifying and accessing the target population; (4) ensuring statistical validity; and (5) identifying resources. Monitoring methodologies discussed in the brief are surveys, longitudinal tracking of families, focus groups, and the use of administrative data. Examples of various methodologies are highlighted in descriptions of individual state efforts. Also considered are issues related to selecting appropriate measures and maintaining credibility. Sample indicators are defined and operationalized. The brief also discusses the importance of communicating the project's results, including identifying target audiences, developing a message, connecting with the media, and disseminating the information. The brief concludes by noting that child advocates must remind the public and policymakers that the success or failure of welfare reform should be judged on the basis of its impact on the well-being of children and families. (Contains 20 notes.) (KB)

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ISSUE Brief

National Association of Child Advocates

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May 1999

Beyond Declining Caseloads: Advocates' Tools for Monitoring Welfare Reform

By Theresa J. Feeley and Sheri A. Brady[1]

POLICYMAKERS AND THE MEDIA TOUT DECLINING WELFARE ROLLS AS EVIDENCE OF THE SUCCESS OF WELFARE REFORM. HOWEVER, CHILD ADVOCATES AND THE PUBLIC DEFINE SUCCESS NOT BY CASELOAD DECLINES BUT BY THE WELL-BEING OF THE FAMILIES AFFECTED BY WELFARE REFORM. INCREASINGLY, ADVOCATES ARE IMPLEMENTING MONITORING PROJECTS TO TRACK THE STATUS OF THESE FAMILIES. THEY USE THE RESULTS TO INFORM THEIR AGENDAS, POLICYMAKERS, AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC. THIS ISSUE BRIEF INTRODUCES MONITORING STRATEGIES AND SUGGESTS ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION IN DESIGNING A MONITORING PROJECT.

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The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in August 1996 transformed this nation's family cash assistance program into a program emphasizing temporary assistance for families transitioning into the workforce. Since then, welfare rolls have declined by approximately 35%[2]*, a fact attributed to a combination of a strong economy and changes in welfare policy. PRWORA imposed a 60-month lifetime limit on federal cash benefits and gave states the discretion to legislate even shorter time limits. As of January 1, 1999, families in ten states began to meet time limits. Time limits will begin to expire for families in an additional ten states this year.*[3] *Thus, the decline in welfare caseloads is expected to continue.*

On the basis of caseload declines, politicians and the media have declared welfare reform a success. However, advocates and the public consider a more accurate measure of the success of welfare reform to be the well-being of families moving from welfare to work.[4] Many families that have left the welfare rolls are hardly self-sufficient; they have little or no earned income or need support services which they do not receive. The concern that welfare reform has left holes in the social safety net has prompted some child advocacy organizations to monitor the status of families affected by welfare reform.

Monitoring, in this instance, refers to the tracking of a family's income, composition, and other social and economic indicators. Monitoring can describe the status of family and children affected by a program or policy, but it cannot prove a causal relationship between specific policies and the indicators. That is, monitoring can demonstrate that people are leaving the welfare rolls, but it cannot determine whether welfare reform, the economy, or some other factor is the cause. Causality can only be determined through scientifically rigorous evaluations employing an experimental design.[5] Lack of resources and access to confidential information hinder the ability of nongovernmental organizations to conduct such evaluations. However, monitoring, while it cannot prove causation, is useful for illustrating trends and highlighting what is happening to children and families. Child advocates are using the information from their monitoring projects to identify families in need of additional support, pinpoint policies in need of reform, and educate policymakers and the general public.

The purposes of monitoring vary, as do the means by which it is done. Thus, regardless of their size or resources, all child advocacy organizations should be able to identify and implement a monitoring project that will enhance the work that they

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are already doing on behalf of children. This issue brief is intended to assist child advocates in deciding whether and how to implement a monitoring project. It presents subjects for consideration and provides an overview of monitoring techniques and issues. Child advocacy organizations interested in pursuing monitoring further should contact the National Association of Child Advocates (NACA) for additional resources and support.

Considering a Monitoring Effort

Monitoring can be an invaluable advocacy tool. However, it also has the potential to consume enormous amounts of staff time and monetary resources. Upfront planning will minimize the monitoring organization's investment and maximize the project's value in the long run. This paper describes the issues for consideration step by step; in practice, the process may be less linear.

Envisioning the Final Product – The single most important step to ensure the success of a monitoring project is deciding upon its purpose at the outset. The eventual use of the information should guide the project's design. Some groups may wish to use the information internally to inform their priorities. Others may wish to use the results to plan and support their legislative and policy agendas.[6] These disparate purposes should be reflected in the organization's project design.

A monitoring project's purpose is particularly relevant when deciding the balance between qualitative and quantitative data to be gathered. For example, the anecdotal information gathered during a series of focus groups with current and former welfare recipients or service providers may be sufficient to inform a child advocacy organization's internal priorities. It can also inform child advocates about structural problems which they can then communicate to policy makers. On the other hand, organizations intending to use their monitoring results to educate policymakers about the status of families will need quantitative data to make the case that trends are widespread enough to merit a policy solution. Incorporating qualitative information such as testimonials and personal stories into the presentation will enrich and explain the statistics and will likely attract more media attention than quantitative data alone.

Choosing a Focus - Once an organization has achieved consensus on the purpose of its monitoring effort, other issues for consideration will begin to crystallize. Prominent among these is the selection of a topic or focus for the monitoring project. Monitoring is most helpful when it is designed to answer specific questions that will help influence policy choices. For example, the project might review whether families leaving welfare are receiving other services and benefits for which they are eligible. Narrowing the focus early in the project ensures the development of a monitoring instrument which will elicit relevant information. Later, having a specific topic will expedite the interpretation and reporting of collected data. The following list suggests several methods of topic development:

- Review the law – Since most organizations will be monitoring in response to a change in state or local policy, a review of the relevant law may prompt the choice of topic.
- Examine existing data – An analysis of existing data – whether administrative or from other monitoring efforts – may reveal gaps and/or inconsistencies, thereby suggesting specific policies or populations in need of further monitoring.
- Tap internal resources – Staff and coalition partners are a tremendous resource. Lead them in a brainstorming session about topics that would benefit from monitoring. Ask them to reflect on conversations with policymakers, service providers, and low-income families as well as articles and editorials which they have read. From their research, they may also be familiar with issues that have arisen in other states and at the federal level.
- Consider what others have done – Advocacy organizations in other states or localities may have already identified and begun to monitor issues which are also relevant in your community. The National Association of Child Advocates has collected monitoring materials from around the country and can serve as a resource.
- Consult the experts – The people most familiar with the barriers to self-sufficiency or accessibility of services are current and former welfare recipients and the service providers or legal services attorneys with whom they are in regular contact. Ask for their suggestions and input via focus groups or one-on-one interviews.

Identifying and Accessing the Target Population – The topics chosen will essentially dictate the target population, that is, the families whose status is being monitored. For example, if an organization chooses time limits as a topic, their target population will be families forced off of welfare at the expiration of their time. If an organization chooses work supports, their target population will be former recipients who left the system because of employment or who have since gained employment. Another potential target group for a monitoring effort is families diverted from welfare. Organizations should consider whether they want to collect information on a baseline group as well as their target population.

The true challenge is not identifying the target population, but accessing it. Ideally, the monitoring organization would have access to state records or to state premises (at which they could do surveying); however, few child advocacy organizations have such collegial relationships with state agencies. Additionally, state privacy laws may prevent the agencies from sharing the personal information of current or former recipients. Because of these obstacles, child advocates may have to rely upon their relationships with independent service providers.

Listening to the Experts: Focus Groups in South Carolina[7] and Wisconsin[8]

NACA member the Alliance for South Carolina's Children conducted 12 focus groups with stakeholders in welfare reform in order to understand the possible implications of the state's TANF plan. Four focus groups were held in each of three counties. In order to get a complete picture of welfare reform's effects, these focus groups were held with different stakeholders. One consisted of Department of Social Service (DSS) staff; another of civic and faith leaders and staff from community agencies. The remaining two focus groups were comprised of low-income women who were denied enrollment in welfare, had their benefits reduced or eliminated, or left the rolls voluntarily. Because of confidentiality concerns, DSS initially chose to recruit client participants rather than release client names to the Alliance for recruiting. However, a poor response forced the Alliance to recruit participants from the community. Each participant was paid $10 and offered assistance with transportation and child care. The focus groups were facilitated by Alliance staff who had been trained by a university-based expert.

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) also conducted focus groups with service providers and employers. The purpose of these groups was to identify issues, both regionally and statewide, that needed further attention from policy makers, but WCCF discovered several benefits. The focus groups provided an opportunity for WCCF staff to network with service providers. In addition, because service providers were able to connect with the advocacy community, they learned to act as advocates at the local level. The service providers also offered WCCF access to current and former welfare recipients willing to be interviewed for case studies. WCCF notes that though beneficial, the focus groups were time consuming to arrange. After the first two or three groups, subsequent groups of providers did not provide new information.

In choosing service providers with whom to work, monitors should be aware of the effect of their selections on the validity of the results. Monitoring projects sometimes miss the most successful families because they have ceased to need or access the services where monitoring is taking place. Monitoring projects may miss those experiencing the most hardship because, by definition, they are not receiving the services that they need. Further complicating matters, these families often move frequently and lack access to a telephone. Monitoring projects strive to accurately record the experiences of the target population. To do so, it may be necessary to tap into a variety of service providers ranging from those providing emergency services (e.g., homeless shelters, food banks) to those serving the broader low-income population (e.g., health clinics, subsidized day care or Head Start programs). Reliance upon service providers may incur additional biases which reflect providers' funding, philosophies, or affiliations. It is impossible to avoid bias completely. The important thing is for child advocates to be clear about any inherent biases when analyzing and presenting results.

Data Capabilities – Though obviously vital to a monitoring project, the capacity for processing and analyzing data should not define the project. Though the internal data capacities of child advocacy organizations vary greatly, other resources (such as those described below) can often be employed to achieve the desired end product. Once the child advocacy organization and its partners have committed to specific tabulation and analytical processes, these processes should be taken into consideration in the selection of measures.

Ensuring Statistical Validity – Quantitative monitoring projects should strive for statistical validity, that is, insuring that the results represent the target population as accurately as possible. Ideally, a monitoring effort would include 100% of the target population. However, few child advocacy organizations have the capacity to gather information from each member of the target population and will, thus, rely on sampling. Because samples do not represent the entire population, results from sampling should be interpreted as approximations which, by definition, contain some degree of error.[9] Child advocates engaged in monitoring efforts should strive to minimize their sampling error, thereby increasing statistical validity.[10]

The single best way to reduce sampling error is to increase sample size. Child advocates should consult statisticians to help them determine a sample size appropriate for their monitoring effort. In general, the larger the sample, the more valid the analysis. Child advocates will likely desire to analyze data for both the entire target population and specific subgroups. Thus, it is necessary to have an overall sample size sufficient to allow for acceptable sampling errors within subgroups. Since sampling error is largely determined by sample size, child advocates should decide early in the monitoring process, and discuss with a statistician, the largest sample error which they deem to be acceptable.

Randomization is also necessary to insure statistical validity. The goal of randomization is to minimize the likelihood that extrinsic influences will shape the sampled population in ways that do not accurately reflect the target population as a whole. For example, because many families use up their food stamps or cash assistance within the first few weeks of each month, surveys being administered at emergency service providers at the end of the month may overestimate the daily needs of families. Thus, in practice, randomization

requires participation by every "X"th person within the relevant population. In the aforementioned food stamp example, bias could be minimized by having service providers sample every fifth person they serve over the course of a month. If monitors are unable to achieve randomization, they should include appropriate caveats in presentations of their results.

Identifying Resources – Collaboration can enhance the value and scope of a monitoring project. Groups from different backgrounds can contribute knowledge, resources, and skills that exceed those of any single organization. Collaboration has the potential to benefit the monitoring project at each stage: linking with other organizations before research begins will bring useful ideas, resources, and connections; during research, collaboration can provide access to a larger and more diverse population, or to a broader range of issues; after the research is completed, a diverse coalition can disseminate the information to reach the broadest possible audience as effectively as possible.[11] Given the potential benefits that can result from collaboration, it is important to consider a variety of partners early in the monitoring project's planning.

- *Foundations* – Advocates can apply for small grants from foundations that usually support research rather than advocacy to help them defray the costs of the monitoring project.
- *Grassroots organizations* – Grassroots organizations may have access to and established relationships with the target population. Due to their familiarity with the target population, grassroot organizations may be able to contribute ideas for the project's topic. They may also be willing to supply staff for data collection and tabulation.
- *Colleges and universities* – A local college or university or their associated cooperative extension service may be able to supply technical information and support that an advocacy organization does not have in-house, such as statisticians or social scientists who can advise about question development, sampling, randomization, and data tabulation. Where faculty or staff are state employees, colleges and universities may be able to access data that, because of privacy concerns, a child advocacy organization would not be privy to. Students may be willing to volunteer or intern with the monitoring project. Advocates may also work with universities that are already conducting research to add an advocacy component to the research. For example, NACA member the Wisconsin Council on Children & Families was included in a university grant to do policy analysis and advocacy using the research results from a university study.
- *National advocacy organizations* – National organizations, such as NACA, are often familiar with or coordinating monitoring efforts in multiple states and localities. They may be able to provide local organizations with sample materials as well as technical assistance in project design.
- *Service providers* – Because they are familiar with low-income families, the barriers that prevent such families from attaining self-sufficiency, and service delivery and implementation issues, service providers are a tremendous resource for any monitoring effort. They can contribute to the development of a topic and specific questions. Additionally, once the project is underway, they may be willing to collect data on their premises.

Tracking Families Over Time: The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families[12]

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF), a NACA member, conducted an 18-month longitudinal study of approximately 20 families in two counties. To find participants for the study, WCCF contacted agencies that serve families on public assistance including Head Start, county departments of human services, and community centers. In order to be eligible for participation, the families had to be involved with TANF/Pay for Performance or its supportive services.

Interviewers contacted potential participants and explained the project: its design, confidentiality policy, the commitment that participation would entail, and information regarding the payment of stipends. Stipends were used as an incentive for continuing participation; families were paid $25 for the initial interview and $10 for each subsequent interview, with the exception of the final interview for which they were paid $25. Families were also asked to provide contact names in the event that they relocated. If a prospect agreed to participate, then both interviewer and subject signed a Research Participation Contract outlining all of the above details.

Researchers interviewed each family to gather background information and baseline data including demographics, employment, educational and welfare histories, income, expenses, and opinions. Follow up interviews were done quarterly, and families were asked questions about employment experiences, changes in child care arrangements, housing, income, and expenses. Families were interviewed by the same person throughout the length of the study.

WCCF reports that, by the end of the 18 months, most participants, especially those that reported greater difficulties in earlier interviews, were "lost" (disconnected telephones, no forwarding addresses). This indicates a greater likelihood of transient and marginal lifestyles among many leaving welfare programs. Staff concluded that the project, though worthwhile, consumed more resources than originally anticipated, especially given the challenge of tracking participants' living arrangements.

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Regardless of whether child advocacy organizations elect to conduct their own monitoring effort, they may wish to serve as policy consultants for other organizations engaged in monitoring.

Choosing a Methodology

Selection of a monitoring methodology should depend upon the purpose and subject of the monitoring project. A variety of approaches are available, but some are more suited to particular purposes than are others. There is no single best approach. This section introduces the various options and briefly describes their strengths and weaknesses.

Surveys – Surveys which gather information at a particular point in time are perhaps the most common monitoring technique. They are relatively inexpensive and, if care is taken to ensure their statistical validity, can yield rich qualitative and quantitative results. A well-developed and administered survey can elicit substantial information through the use of both open- and closed-ended questions. Surveys are particularly useful in assessing whether a family or sub-group of families is experiencing hardships.

Surveys allow for substantial flexibility. They can be administered over the phone, through the mail, in person, or through a combination of these methods. Organizations can choose between developing their own surveys, using those developed by others, or adapting national surveys to meet their local needs.[13] In addition to gathering information from current or former welfare recipients, surveys can be used to gather information from service providers about process changes and how they are affecting the services they provide and the clients they serve.

The relatively few drawbacks to surveys can usually be overcome. Of primary concern is obtaining an acceptable response rate. Because of the possibility that the experiences of nonrespondents differ from that of respondents, high response rates are important to maintaining the credibility of a monitoring effort. For example, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation has an internal minimum standard requiring an 80 percent response rate. Child advocates should discuss with their consulting statisticians whether it is preferable to have a relatively small sample size and a high response rate or a large sample with a low response rate. Because they often miss families who are homeless, have moved, or lack a telephone, surveys administered via mail or phone tend to have a relatively low response rate. Thus, a decision to administer surveys in person may result in a higher response rate as well as a greater diversity of respondents. Service providers may be willing to administer surveys themselves or to let volunteers survey clients on their premises.

Surveys rely on individuals' understanding, knowledge, and recollections. Trained interviewers can improve the survey accuracy somewhat; however, because many people forget or confuse details and dates, surveys are not the most reliable means by which to gather very specific data such as employment and financial information.

Longitudinal Tracking of Families – This approach involves picking a group of families to track at certain intervals over a specified period of time. The benefit of longitudinal studies is that they provide greater detail and depth than the one-time snapshot received from a survey. For example, they can demonstrate how the status of families leaving welfare for employment changes over the course of several years. This approach requires

Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Data: The Washington Welfare Reform Coalition[14]

The Washington Welfare Reform Coalition, in which NACA member The Children's Alliance participates, combines quantitative and qualitative monitoring data to educate state policymakers. The Coalition has as two of its four goals collecting statistics and personal stories about the impact of welfare reform. In addition, the Coalition distributed fact sheets about welfare reform and recruited over 400 people for participation in local low-income advocacy groups.

Coalition members survey welfare recipients and other low-income people using a state-specific adaptation of the Coalition for Human Needs survey.[15] The survey asks about changes in benefit receipt, additional sources of support, whether basic needs are consistently being met, current employment status, and barriers to employment. The survey results are used to make policy recommendations, influence legislators, and to educate the media to work for accurate facts.

The advocacy value of the data is amplified when combined with the personal stories of low-income people and families. Survey respondents are given the opportunity to fill out a "Reality Check" addressed to the Governor (a previous phase of the project had the checks going to state legislators). The check includes the individual's name, address, monthly income, and family size. Space on the back of the check allows for the individual to detail their monthly income and expenditures and to write their personal story. The checks are sent to the Governor in the hope of reminding him that policies affect the lives of real people. The checks were also released publicly at a press conference in conjunction with the release of the Kellogg Foundation's National Poll on Welfare Reform and Health Care Reform. The monitoring results garnered substantial press coverage, much of it questioning the state's welfare reform plan for the first time. The press coverage and concurrent advocacy raised the awareness of the public and elected officials about potential negative effects of welfare reform.

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the ongoing cooperation of representative families willing to participate in what can sometimes be an invasive and lengthy process. The major drawback of a longitudinal approach is that some families will likely drop out or disappear as the study progresses. One way to minimize the dropout rate is to offer stipends for each round of participation. Because of the difficulties and cost of tracking families over time, most advocacy organizations will only be able to track a small number of families, minimizing the statistical validity of the information collected. Nonetheless, longitudinal studies can provide qualitative information unlikely to be collected elsewhere. (See box on Wisconsin's study.)

Focus Groups – In this approach, the researcher brings together representatives from the target population to facilitate a discussion of relevant issues. Focus groups can be used alone or in conjunction with other monitoring tools. The size and nature of focus groups precludes quantitative analysis; however, because they elicit personal experiences and opinions they provide valuable insight to behavior and can enrich associated data. Focus groups are particularly useful for gathering information about service delivery and process issues, e.g., what happens when recipients apply for child care subsidies or what changes have taken place at service agencies since the passage of welfare reform. Focus groups elicit people's views and experiences at a single point in time; however, monitors may wish to consider hosting repeated focus groups to learn how the experiences and opinions of the target population change over time. (See box on South Carolina and Wisconsin.)

Administrative Data – Under the 1996 welfare law, states are required to collect and report data that may be helpful to advocates who want to monitor the status of families affected by welfare reform. The federal government requires states to collect TANF-caseload data on families. In addition, states applying for a caseload reduction credit[16] or high performance bonus[17] are required to collect and submit additional data. Advocates can request and obtain from the state both the federally required data and any data collected by the state for its own purposes. For example, NACA member Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) has obtained disaggregated data from the state and may conduct its own analysis of the variables they want to monitor.

While advocates may not be able to access state databases directly, they may wish to encourage states to use names or social security numbers to cross-match TANF data with other state data bases. For example, cross-matching with unemployment insurance data bases and the new hire registries used for child support enforcement will indicate whether former recipients are working, how much they are earning, what types of jobs they are getting, and whether they are advancing into higher paying jobs. Cross-matching TANF data with social service agency records will indicate which families are continuing to use other social services such as food stamps and Medicaid; cross-matching with child abuse registries can identify families in which abuse and neglect are occurring. While administrative data tend to be very accurate, analysis and cross-matching requires a high level of technical proficiency. Furthermore, because of privacy concerns, state agencies may be reluctant to release these data. Even if states are willing to share data, they will likely require a confidentiality agreement. Child advocacy organizations may be able to overcome these obstacles by partnering with state colleges or universities.

Selecting Appropriate Measures[18]

The challenge in designing a monitoring instrument is determining what information and data elements are most relevant to the project's purpose. Participants are often reluctant to fill out long or complex surveys, and excess data make data tabulation and analysis more cumbersome. This is where having narrowed the topic sufficiently will pay off. Extraneous information that could cloud or overshadow the point can be discarded.

For each of the topical areas chosen for the monitoring project, actual operational measures need to be developed. Researchers do this by first breaking down the topic (e.g., self-sufficiency) into more specific concepts (e.g., labor market attachment) which can then be measured in a variety of ways. For example, labor force attachment can be measured by counting when a client first gets a job and/or by the length of time he/she remains in the job. These operational measures may vary dependent upon the target population and the unit of analysis (family, community, etc.) selected for monitoring. The chart on the following page lists sample concepts and associated operational measures, some of which could potentially be broken down even further. The chart provides examples and is not intended to be exhaustive.

Maintaining Credibility

Advocates must acknowledge the limitations of project design and methodology during all phases of their monitoring project. Whether during the analysis of data, the development of findings and recommendations, or the creation of written materials, it is crucial that the data not be misrepresented or the conclusions overstated. In this way, credibility is enhanced.

As stated previously, monitoring does not establish causality. Thus, advocates should avoid strong claims about cause and effect. For example, if the monitoring results suggest that average family income has declined, advocates should resist making assertions that "welfare changes have hurt families." Rather, they should use the results to establish that families are faring worse than they were previously and state that the data collected is consistent with the conclusion that welfare changes are to blame.[19]

Communicating the Results

Child advocacy organizations may engage in monitoring for a variety of reasons. For some, the sole purpose is to inform their organization's internal agenda. However, the vast

Sample Indicators for Monitoring

TOPIC	DEFINITION	OPERATIONAL MEASURES
Dependency	The use of public assistance programs to meet basic economic needs.	caseload counts; reasons for exit; re-entry counts; grant amounts; duration of welfare "spell"; use of other public services (e.g., Medicaid, food stamps, SSI)
Hardship	Maintenance of a minimal standard of living.	homelessness (shelter occupancy); residential stability/mobility (eviction rates, doubling up of families in single-family residence); food insecurity (use of food pantries & soup kitchens); access to medical care
Workforce Attachment	Demonstrated efforts at obtaining or maintaining employment.	job entry; type of work (paid, subsidized, community); hours of work; enrollment in training; job retention/turnover; job advancement
Economic Well-being	Income and financial status.	earned or unearned income; job benefits; child support
Utilization of Support Services	Whether families need and are accessing supportive services (child care, food stamps, Medicaid, CHIP).	application rates; eligibility rates; utilization rates; duration of use
Community Involvement	Communities' support of welfare reform.	public attitudes toward welfare; business/community partnerships; charitable services
Economic Development	Accessibility of jobs that encourage self-sufficiency.	changes in low-wage labor market; job creation; creation of new types of support services; availability of transportation to work sites
Family Formation	Individuals' ability to form and maintain stable family bonds.	marriage/divorce rates; cohabitation rates; additional/post-program-entry births; out-of-wedlock births; out-of-home placements, kinship care

majority of child advocacy organizations intend to use the results of their monitoring project to educate various constituencies about the lives of low-income persons affected by welfare reform and about policy changes with the potential to improve those lives. Effective education and advocacy around monitoring results requires that advocates devise a communication strategy for identifying target audiences, developing a message, connecting with the media, and disseminating the information.

Identifying Target Audiences – The choice of target audiences is dictated by the purpose of the monitoring project. In fact, some organizations may choose their topics based on whom they are trying to influence. The target audience often includes elected and appointed officials as well as other opinion leaders, such as business leaders. Advocates might also target service providers, the religious community, and journalists.

Developing a Message – Advocates should develop a clear and concise message of not more than ten words[20] which is based on the results of the monitoring project. The message should be consistent with the values and mission of the advocacy organization and link the research findings to their impact on children. For example, if the monitoring results show that families are moving frequently because they are unable to afford rent, advocates may wish to point out that the possible effect on children is disruption of school and social relationships. In addition, advocates should develop talking points which highlight the findings and are expressed in language which the general public can understand. The talking points will help keep the message consistent and should guide all media interactions.

Messages sometimes fail to communicate their intent. However, advocates can minimize the possibility of miscommunication by testing messages with one or more focus groups prior to their dissemination. Obtaining feedback from focus

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groups that resemble the intended target audiences can enable advocates to both refine their messages and to anticipate questions prior to dissemination.

Connecting With the Media – Reaching journalists is a critical component of educating policy makers and changing public opinion. The ideal time for advocates to learn about the media and to forge relationships with journalists is before they are needed. Gaining an appreciation for the culture and rhythm of the media industry and building relationships of trust and credibility will improve the likelihood of receiving appropriate, accurate, and well placed press coverage. In addition to the traditional press conference, advocates should host media briefings and meet with editorial boards. These meetings offer journalists the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the project's findings.

Disseminating the Information – Long reports can boost credibility and be valuable sources for future reference. Nonetheless, as part of their communications strategy, advocates should also create summaries, fact sheets, and short papers with a minimum of data. These shorter pieces tend to be particularly effective for reaching the media and policymakers.

Materials related to the monitoring project should be disseminated to the targeted audiences identified in the original project plan. Advocates can improve dissemination by asking coalition partners to distribute written materials within their circles, offer summaries in newsletters, and to host briefings in their communities. Advocates should also consider distributing summaries in public places such as libraries and city halls or in places which families frequent such as child care centers, clinics and grocery stores.

In addition to written materials, advocates should select and train spokespersons (individuals from the population being studied can be effective here), establish speakers' bureaus to reach community groups such as Kiwanis and PTAs, and write op-ed pieces and letters to the editor to remind the public of the monitoring project's findings over time.

Conclusion

In light of assertions equating caseload declines with the success of welfare reform, child advocates must remind the public and policymakers that the success or failure of welfare reform should be judged on the basis of its impact on the well-being of children and families. Though monitoring is not able to establish causality, it is an important tool for keeping the focus on whether families are faring better or worse in this age of welfare reform. Monitoring projects do not have to be complicated, cumbersome, or expensive to be effective, and child advocacy organizations interested in pursuing monitoring have tremendous flexibility in the design of their projects. NACA looks forward to serving as a resource for organizations hoping to hold their states and localities accountable through monitoring.

Endnotes

1 Sheri Brady, former NACA Devolution Project Associate, is currently Program Coordinator of the Western Policy Leaders Forum for the Center for Policy Alternatives.
2 Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 1998. Available on-line at http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/news/tables.htm.
3 Welfare Information Network, *TANF Time Limits' Data of First Impact Statewide*, January 12, 1998, http://www.welfareinfo.org/tanftime.htm.
4 Bonney & Company, *The National Poll on Welfare Reform and Healthcare*, sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, January 1999, pp. 24-25.
5 Thomas Kaplan, "Evaluating Comprehensive State Welfare Reforms: An Overview" in *Focus*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty, vol. 18, No. 3, Spring 1997.
6 Child advocates may also wish to use monitoring to organize. For additional information and examples, refer to *Low Income Groups Use Surveys as an Organizing Tool* available on-line at http://www.lincproject.org/march.htm.
7 For more information, contact Patrick Cobb at the Alliance for South Carolina's Children at 803-256-4670.
8 For more information, contact Jill Jacklitz at the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families at 608-284-0580.
9 For example, if a survey with a sampling error of three percent indicates that 67 percent of a sample of former welfare recipients are currently employed, it can reasonably be concluded that the odds are very high that the proportion of former welfare recipients currently employed is between 64 and 70 percent.
10 Herbert Weisberg and Bruce Bowen, *An Introduction to Survey Research and Data Analysis*, W.H. Freeman and Company, pp. 36-37.
11 The National Welfare and Monitoring Advocacy Partnership, *Handbook on Community Welfare Monitoring*, January 1999, p. 2.
12 For more information, contact Jill Jacklitz at the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families at 608-284-0580.
13 NACA has copies of surveys designed by the Coalition on Human Needs, the National Welfare Monitoring and Advocacy Partnership, and the US Department of Agriculture as well as those developed by NACA members in Arkansas, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Washington.
14 For more information, contact Aiko Schaefer of the Coalition at 206-694-6794.
15 Copies of the original and modified surveys are available from Terri Feeley at NACA, 202-289-0777 ext. 203.
16 A state can reduce its work participation rates if the average monthly number of cases receiving assistance in the preceding fiscal year was lower that the average number of cases that received assistance in Fiscal Year 1995. 64 Fed. Reg. 17887 to be codified at 45 CFR §261.40 (c) (3).
17 Section 403(a) (4) of the Social Security Act provides $1 billion over a five year period to reward states that achieve high performance levels under TANF. In order to compete for the bonus awards, states must submit aggregate data on job-entry, retention, and earning rates. The first award will be made in Fiscal Year 1999 based on performance above a threshold level in fiscal Year 1998. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Program Instruction No. TANF-ACF-PI-98-01 (March 17, 1998).
18 For additional information, refer to *Tracking Welfare Reform: Designing Follow-Up Studies of Recipients Who Leave Welfare* by Jack Tweedie, Evelyn Ganzglass, Susan Golonka, and Suzanne Fialkof, available on-line at http://www.ncsl.org/statefed/welfare/trackbrf.htm and *Welfare Reform: How Will We Know If It Works?* by the Midwest Welfare Peer Assistance Network, available on-line at http:// www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp and http://www.welfareinfo.org.
19 National Welfare Monitoring and Advocacy Partnership, pp. 12-14.
20 Kathy Bonk, Henry Griggs, and Emily Tynes, *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, p. 37.

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The NACA Devolution Staff:
Deborah Stein, Project Director
Theresa J. Feeley, Project Associate

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHILD ADVOCATES
1522 K Street, NW • Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005
202-289-0777 ext. 203
202-289-0776 (fax)
feeley@childadvocacy.org

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